

## Setting the Record Straight on "Jingle Bells"

### A Quest for Authenticity

By THE REV. CANON ROBERT MERRY

China confronted Harriet and me with many surprises on our trip there to the far northwest in October of 1982. She had touched at Hong Kong and Shanghai on the coast in a round-the-world trip in 1939 and done her master's thesis at the University of Michigan on "Islam in China" and I had spent a month 50 years before traveling through war-torn territory and observing the anti-Western resentment of the people, but still there were many real surprises—large and small.

The largest was the alacrity with which a billion people had taken hold of their destinies with both hands so to speak and cleaned the country of drugs and prostitution and government corruption and begun the raising of enough food to feed all their hungry people, in contrast to the other great Communist power that has to import millions of tons of grain to feed its own, this land which used to be known as the "bread basket" of the world.

Small surprises included the custom of having little school children stand outside their school buildings and wave at our bus as it sped by. But the greatest small surprise was the prevalence of the refrain of "Jingle Bells." On practically every occasion when Western songs were sung, this was sung most loudly of all. I was prepared for the singing of the French Revolutionary song, now the national anthem of France, the "Marseillaise," as I had heard it was Mao Tse Tung's favorite, but I never heard it once. We did hear the refrain from "Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory," and I led a restaurant full of Mongolians in the singing of it, but somehow it never had the universal popularity of "Jingle Bells." In fact, as I did my research in preparation for this essay, I discovered that its popularity is indeed worldwide.

All my adult life I've tried to set the record straight on the realities that form the basis of this song, how fanciful it is and how dangerously misleading as an accurate reading of the experience thus set to song. I did not feel what with the language and ethnic differences that I should attempt to focus realistic attention on its words and set the Chinese straight; namely that this is a pure fantasy and New Englanders in particular delight in such things to cushion themselves against a cruel natural world. I have tried, as I say, to set the record straight, and it is far from my intention to prick the balloon of fantasy. I only ask that it be so regarded and I herewith submit a few hard facts to substantiate this view.

Before the winter season gives way to spring and while we are still skiing and sledding and skating and on occasion sleighing, perhaps this is a good time to set the record straight, especially for those who live in New England.

I am taking the liberty of reporting as nearly as I can to actual fact and experience just what riding in an open sleigh with the necessary preambles and consequences was like on a wintry day in a snowstorm behind a spirited horse. I shall conclude the article with date researched by Susan Reed and Diane Hunter of Duxbury Free Library as to the man who wrote the words to the song, and what his life was like.

First, it would be a cold day with the thermometer no higher than the low 20s with snow and sleet and pellets of hail coming down in enough volume to assure ample snow traction on the road going and coming. It would hence be impossible to do any outside work and let us assume that the inside work of a retail meat market such as changing the sawdust on the floor, swabbing out and replenishing the salt water porcelain tanks for corned meat and washing the huge maple butcher block were all in control.

Of course, the horses had been cleaned out and groomed and watered earlier as was the every day custom. Then at breakfast it would be decided that Aunt Bertha had not heard from us for many months and a trip to see her was long overdue. She lived in Hanover and with her husband who ran a plumbing business, almost never left home and she'd welcome our visit even without warning.

So I would take an apple in my left hand off the sideboard bowl, get wrapped up and head for the barn. Here I'd pick up a 15-inch piece of 2 x 4 and sling Molly's bridle over my shoulder and go to her stall asking for entrance. I held the bit in my bare hand so it would not skin her tongue and started into the stall, holding the 15-inch piece of 2 x 4 perpendicularly to the wall beside her ribs. She'd hunch over and encountering the wood, decide she'd rather not crack her own ribs, so would let me in up to her head which she'd begin to toss. Horses are very intelligent and even though she'd seem not to know she'd heard the wind and the wasn't about to go out into it.

This is where the apple came in. I held this out to her and as she opened her mouth for it she also closed it on the bridle bit, and a few deft strokes later the leather strap was over her head and buckled under her chin.

Backing her out of the stall, I would tie her to a post and throw on the bit of the harness, a carefully designed network of leather and iron rings and buckles that imprisoned the horse in a pulling position. Draft horses had huge straw-filled collars and heavy leather traces for pulling large loads but small

sleigh and wagon horses simply wore leather breast straps with much smaller traces which in turn hooked onto the sleigh.

The next task was backing the horse into the shafts—parallel poles fastened to the vehicle to be pulled. Backing an unwilling horse into these shafts could be a bit tricky, as it was the last desperate stand a horse could make in resistance to an unpleasant trip. First was the blocking of the stall entrance which the nifty 2 x 4 circumvented, then it was refusing the bridle, now overcome with the apple. Now was the actual locking of the animal into the sleigh and it was no fun for either the horse or driver and angry looks and words would be exchanged before it was accomplished. But this done, the sleigh would be driven up to the house door and a brother or sister or 2 would emerge with a buffalo robe on an arm and a satchel full of bricks warmed on the cook stove after breakfast and wrapped in newspapers to be put under foot. Thus assisted, we took off.

Perhaps at this point it may be useful to refresh our minds with a recitation of the words of "Jingle Bells."

*Dashing through the snow,  
In a one-horse open sleigh,  
O'er the fields we go,  
Laughing all the way.*

*Bells on Bobtail ring,  
Making spirits bright,  
O, what fun it is to laugh and sing  
A sleighing song tonight.*

*Jingle bells, jingle bells,  
Jingle all the way,  
O, what fun it is to laugh and sing  
A sleighing song tonight.*

So we are now under way, conceivably singing this song. But we note our horse has 3 more darts in her quiver. First has to do with the sleigh hitch. Wagons are hitched with traces of a swivel bolted pole to which the traces are hooked, so that the swinging motion of the horses' legs is not imparted to the vehicle being hauled. But with no such shock absorber in a sleigh the jerking motion of the horse in running is imparted directly to the passengers.

Secondly, except on near zero days as the horse trots in the snow, great snowballs form under its feet, as large as small cannon balls and these bombard the riders incessantly so that the feeling is something akin

being nailed, but with no such shock absorber in a sleigh the jerking motion of the horse in running is imparted directly to the passengers.

Thirdly, except on near zero days as the horse trots in the snow, great snowballs form under its feet, as large as small cannon balls and these bombard the riders incessantly so that the feeling is something akin to those of the British in Boston during the American Revolution when George Washington set his cannon on Dorchester Heights that fateful day we all recall. Sleighs had high dashboards to prevent total disaster but some balls always got through. One last thing the horse could do to assure a maximum of discomfort and that had to do with the road. Most snowstorms while piling up snow drifts, always leave bare patches of road which provide a hazard of which the horse can take full advantage. A spirited horse would lunge into these spots with the sleigh brought almost to a total stop in a grinding, screeching crunch, throwing the riders to the bottom of the sleigh in a tumble of buffalo robe, bricks and newspapers.

The song again first refers to an "open sleigh." There were a few sleighs that had canopies as on stage coaches, but most had not. Because of this, heads and faces were bundled up so far as to prevent any "laughing" that would be recognized as such. Again, as New Englanders know, "o'er the fields we go" had to be pure fantasy for no field exists in New England that does not have its stone wall fence. It is easily imagined the fate of driving a sleigh "o'er a field" in these parts, not to mention the possible broken leg for the horse.

As for the "fun" involved—I have tried to outline in some detail the task that confronted the would-be sleighing enthusiast BEFORE he actually gets under way on a sleighing adventure. I leave it to anyone with any sense of realism just how or when the fun comes. My firm belief is that the song is at one with that wonderful Christmas story poem, "The Night Before Christmas," and I have no objection to this except that we must recognize fantasy for what it is and be willing to accept reality for what that is.

With this in mind, I sought help to discover with the Duxbury Free Library's help, just where "Jingle Bells" came from. It was written by a James Pierpont and first published in Boston by Oliver Ditson in 1857 under the title, "A One Horse Open Sleigh" and again in 1959 under the title "Jingle Bells." James Pierpont was born in Medford, the son of a Unitarian minister who lived from 1785 to 1886 and was in trouble in his church over abolition. His son James took to the sea, sailing out of San Francisco. He later moved to the South where he took up the Confederate cause much to his father's dismay and became a songwriter. Oddly enough, his most popular piece was not "Jingle Bells" but possibly another song that became a famous Confederate Army song, "We Conquer or We Die."

I had satisfied my curiosity as I knew the writer of "Jingle Bells" was far enough removed from the actual experience of the event it purports to describe as to be an almost total falsehood. Mr. Pierpont obviously so far removed from sleighs and horses and riding with them, could conjure up a total fiction in his reverie about his childhood days in Medford, Massachusetts, but it is quite obvious that sitting on a southern mansion's portico on a sultry afternoon with a mint julep in hand, he could indeed write such a song and put these words to it without a qualm.

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But it does inflict some damage on the credibility of young people today who are in the habit of stepping into a garage, turning a key and being off to ski or toboggan or even sleigh in the moonlight in some far off country town, with a horse all groomed, fed and watered and willingly hitched to an "open sleigh" for a fun trip, that given the right conditions would indeed be fun.

Our trip to Aunt Bertha's would consume most of the morning, but after warm beef stew she always kept on the back of the stove and a chat with Uncle Harry, we'd brave the storm again and after "dashing through the snow" reach home by nightfall. I submit this autobiographical record in a passionate plea for authenticity.

Lately, we learned that the "Night Before Christmas" was written by a man, Dr. Clement Moore, a teacher at the Episcopal General Theological Seminary, and we appreciate the joy that comes every year with its recitation. The joy of "Jingle Bells," I do not think, is diminished by knowing that it was written by a human being, too, and as with the former Christmas fantasy, this fantasy can also be recognized as such.

The full song with tune is available in the library in "American Popular Songs of the 19th Century," I loved the last stanza:

*Now the ground is white,  
Go it while you're young,  
Take the girls tonight,  
And sing this sleighing song.*

## Tropical Forest Loss May Be Killing Off Songbirds, Study Says

By WILLIAM BOOTH  
Washington Post Staff Writer

(Permission was given by the Washington Post to publish this article.)

### Songbirds, Study Says

By WILLIAM BOOTH  
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Populations of many species of migratory birds, including some of the most familiar songbirds in the Washington area, are rapidly and dramatically declining, and tropical deforestation may be the primary reason, according to scientists who have just completed an analysis of 20 years of bird surveys from across North America.

The severe declines of many songbirds that spend winters in South and Central America and summers in the U.S. and Canada have occurred in less than a decade, with some species diminishing by almost half.

"Something dramatic is happening," said Russell Greenberg, a research scientist at the National Zoological Park who participated in the study. "I would call the decline severe and say it was of tremendous concern."

Even some of the most common birds known to the casual backyard bird watcher have suffered serious setbacks. In a recent 9-year period, the wood thrush has been reduced by more than 30%, the Baltimore, or northern oriole population has fallen by about 23% and the scarlet tanager has declined by almost 10%.

"It's tragic. We're going to have fewer birds," said Sam Droege of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center. Droege did the study, which has been accepted for publication in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences with Greenberg and colleagues Chandler Robbins and John Sauer.

"It's not at the point where we're talking about extinction, but it should never get to that point," said David Wilcove, an ornithologist and ecologist with the Wilderness Society.

The survey overcomes limitations that led some to discount similar findings of earlier bird surveys. In recent years, a number of scientists have shown long-term declines in migrating songbirds, particularly those species that breed and raise their young in forests. But previous studies have been based on an examination of a small number of special plots that are surveyed for birds year after year.

Some locales experienced more dramatic declines than others and some scientists had argued that these downward trends could be explained by the localized effects of development or increased urbanization. One long-term study site, for example, is located in Rock Creek Park. The site has experienced a 70% decline in migratory songbirds since the 1940s a period of explosive development in the Washington area.

A relatively new problem afflicting birds in suburban areas has been a trend toward heavier use of pesticides on lawns. Diseased and dead birds in such areas have been found to carry high levels of toxic lawn chemicals, presumably ingested by eating contaminated insects. Although this problem apparently